

Research on the Folk Customs and Musical Characteristics of the Tujia Ethnic Minority in China

Zhou,Ling

Hubei Preschool Teachers College, Wuhan, Hubei, 430000, China

Abstract: As is well known, China is home to 56 ethnic groups, among which the Tujia people are one of the minority groups. The Tujia population is mainly distributed in the border areas of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, and Guizhou. The Tujia people are one of the larger minority groups in China, with unique characteristics in their language, writing, history, culture, traditional festivals, customs, religious beliefs, and economic life. It is precisely these distinctive local customs that give Tujia music its unique style and charm, forming a distinctive ethnic and regional character. This paper introduces the folk customs of the Tujia people and studies the characteristics and forms of Tujia music, aiming to promote Tujia music, protect and inherit this precious cultural heritage, promote cultural diversity, enhance ethnic identity, and advance artistic development. Tujia music is not only an important part of Chinese music but also a valuable treasure of the Chinese nation's cultural heritage, with profound historical and cultural significance.

Keywords: China; Ethnic minority; Tujia; Musical characteristics; Musical style

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The Tujia people are one of China's ethnic minorities, primarily distributed in the border areas of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, and Guizhou, such as the Wuling Mountain region. Below is a brief introduction to the Tujia people:

1. Population and Distribution

- Population: According to 2020 data, the Tujia population is approximately 9 million, making them one of the larger minority groups in China.

- Distribution: The Tujia population is mainly concentrated in Xiangxi in Hunan, Enshi in Hubei, Qianjiang in Chongqing, and Tongren in Guizhou.

2. Language and Writing

- Language: The Tujia people have their own language, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, but most people have switched to using Chinese.

- Writing: Historically, the Tujia people used their own script, but now they primarily use Chinese characters.

3. History and Culture

- History: The Tujia people have a long history, traceable to the ancient Ba people, with deep roots in Ba culture.

- Culture: Tujia culture is rich, especially known for its singing and dancing, such as the "Hand-Waving Dance" and "Crying Wedding Songs," which are important cultural symbols.

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About the Author

Zhou,Ling (1981-), female, the Han nationality, Jingmen City, Hubei Province, Research direction is in musicology, Master Degree Candidate.

4. Traditional Festivals

- Gajian: The most important festival for the Tujia people, similar to the Han Chinese Spring Festival but celebrated on the 29th or 28th day of the twelfth lunar month.

- June Sixth: Also known as "Drying the Dragon Robe," this festival involves ancestor worship and prayers for a good harvest. On this day, people dress in traditional attire and celebrate with singing and dancing.

5. Customs and Habits

- Clothing: Traditional clothing is mainly blue and black, with women often wearing embroidered blouses and aprons, while men wear short jackets with matching embroidered hats, creating a harmonious and beautiful color combination.

- Cuisine: The Tujia diet is characterized by sour and spicy flavors, with specialties such as cured meat, pickled vegetables, and glutinous rice cakes. During the New Year, every household prepares cured meat, and potato-based snacks are particularly delicious, making the Tujia people renowned for their culinary skills.

6. Architectural Features

- Diaojiaolou: Traditional Tujia stilt houses are built on mountainsides, with the lower level elevated and the upper level used for living, adapting to the mountainous terrain.

7. Economic Life

- Economy: Traditionally, the Tujia people relied on agriculture, growing rice and corn. In recent years, tourism has become an important source of income.

8. Modern Development

- Development: With modernization, the Tujia region has seen significant improvements in economy, education, and healthcare, while traditional culture is being preserved and inherited.

With its unique culture and history, the Tujia people have become an important part of the Chinese nation. Tujia music is an important component of Chinese minority music, with distinctive ethnic and regional characteristics. Below is a study of the characteristics and forms of Tujia music:

9. Characteristics of Tujia Music

(1) Language and vocal style

- Tujia folk songs can be sung in either the Tujia language or Chinese.

- In terms of vocal style, Tujia folk songs are divided into high-pitched and flat-pitched styles. High-pitched songs are used to express intense, high-spirited emotions, while flat-pitched songs are more straightforward and plain.

(2) Structure and form

- Tujia folk songs have various structures, including "one-line," "three-line," "four-line," and "five-line" forms. The "four-line" structure is the most common, with lyrics consisting of seven characters per line and four lines in total, making the

structure simple and clear.

- Tujia music also includes "hoe grass gongs and drums," work chants, lullabies, children's songs, and custom songs. These songs have unique forms, such as the "hoe grass gongs and drums," which are sung by two or four people leading a work team, and work chants, which are used in labor scenarios like logging and boating.

(3) Melody and mode

- The melodies of Tujia music are mostly stepwise, closely integrated with the language, and highly chant.

- In terms of mode, Tujia music often uses the 徵 (zhi) and 羽 (yu) modes of Chinese traditional music, with fewer uses of the 宫 (gong) mode. Some folk songs also exhibit modal alternation.

(4) Content and themes

- Tujia music covers a wide range of content, including love songs, ancient songs, ritual songs, life songs, and sorrow songs. These songs reflect the lives, emotions, and history of the Tujia people.

- For example, the "Crying Wedding Song" is a unique custom song where the bride sings to express her sorrow at leaving her family and her hopes for the future.

10. Forms of Tujia Music

(1) Folk songs

- Folk songs are one of the most common forms of Tujia music. Tujia folk songs not only have high artistic value but also carry the historical memories and cultural traditions of the Tujia people.

- Folk songs also include a special form called "chuan gezi," which consists of a "hao'er" (four-line folk song) and a "ge'er" (five-line folk song). When sung, the "hao'er" is sung first, followed by the "ge'er," and then the 1st, 2nd, and 4th lines of the "hao'er" are inserted into the "five-line song."

(2) Hoe grass gongs and drums

- Also known as "hoe grass songs" or "digging songs," these are sung by the Tujia people during collective labor.

- The melodies of hoe grass gongs and drums come in various forms, such as single-section melodies, two-section melodies, and melodies formed by combining multiple folk songs. These melodies have unique characteristics in terms of rhythm and singing style.

(3) Work chants

- Work chants are sung by the Tujia people during labor activities like logging and boating.

- The melodies of work chants are excited and bright, motivating workers and fostering teamwork. For example, boat chants are popular in the You and Li river areas, including paddle chants, oar chants, and towing chants.

(4) Custom songs

- Custom songs are sung by the Tujia people during specific occasions and festivals.

- the "Hand-Waving Song" is sung during large sacrificial activities where the Tujia people perform the Hand-Waving Dance, covering topics like migration, settlement, self-defense, and land cultivation.

Tujia music has distinctive ethnic characteristics and diverse forms and rich content. These songs not only reflect the lives and emotions of the Tujia people but also carry their historical memories and cultural traditions.

The melodies and modes of Tujia music reflect its distinctive ethnic characteristics in multiple aspects, as detailed below:

11. Melodic Characteristics and Ethnic Identity

(1) Close integration with language

- The development of Tujia music's melodies is closely tied to the Tujia language, reflecting the unique ethnic charm of Tujia music. The rise and fall of the melodies and the changes in rhythm correspond to the tones and rhythms of the Tujia language, giving Tujia music a strong local flavor and local accent.

(2) Beautiful and moving melodies

- The melodies of Tujia folk songs are primarily stepwise and hop, creating move and highly ethnic melodies. These melodies reflect the optimistic and generous of the Tujia people and their love for nature and life.

(3) Improvised lyrics and singability

- For example, the "Luor Tune" of the Tujia people in Shizhu has simple melodies, with each song's range within an octave and few ornaments, making the melodies smooth and easy to sing. This characteristic has allowed Tujia music to spread widely among the people, becoming an important way for the Tujia people to express emotions and record life.

12. Modal Characteristics and Ethnic Identity

(1) Diversity of modes

- The modes of Tujia music are mainly based on the 宫 (gong) and 羽 (yu) modes, with the 羽 mode being more common. At the same time, some folk songs in certain regions exhibit modal alternation. This diversity enriches the emotional expression of Tujia music.

(2) Association of modes with emotions

- Different modes in Tujia music carry different emotional expressions. For example, some modes are more suitable for expressing joyful and leap emotions, while others are better for solemn and dignified atmospheres. This association makes Tujia music more vivid and image in expressing ethnic customs, historical memories, and cultural traditions.

(3) Integration of modes with regional characteristics

- The modes of Tujia music are also closely related to the regional characteristics of where the Tujia people live. For example, Tujia folk songs in western Hunan often use the silent 羽 (yu) mode, based on the notes so, la, do, re, and so, with circuitry embellishments, creating melodies with a strong local flavor. This integration of modes and regional characteristics has helped Tujia music maintain its distinctive ethnic identity during its inherit and development.

In conclusion, the Tujia people are an ethnic minority with distinctive characteristics, and the melodies and modes of Tujia music reflect their ethnic identity in multiple aspects. These characteristics have not only allowed Tujia music to spread widely among the people, becoming an important way for the Tujia people to express emotions and record life, but have also added rich colors and connotation to the unity in diversity of Chinese music culture.

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